

Irish Cinema: The Last Decade

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If Neil Jordan's tour de force *Michael Collins* (1996) for Warner Brothers and his bravura adaptation of Pat McCabe's novel *The Butcher Boy* (1997) mark a kind of high-water mark for contemporary Irish film, what happened to Irish cinema in the succeeding decade? This brief essay will outline the major changes in funding and production that determine the environment in which new films get made. It will then survey some of the key thematic tropes of films made in or about Ireland and its culture.

I'm going to show that narrow-gauge or essentialist notions of a national cinema have become well-nigh impossible to sustain in the contemporary period. Using the "national" optic to view Irish cinema has always been problematic because the country and the culture being represented on screen are far more complex, diverse and variegated than an orthodox political nationalism will permit. There remains a persistent tradition of viewing "Irish film" as a combination of "Troubles" narratives set in Northern Ireland, nostalgic romantic comedies (often set in the 1950s), historically set "heritage" films (often adaptations of novels) or generic crime/caper movies, of which *In Bruges* (2008) is perhaps the latest example.

The fact is that most films made in Ireland or about Ireland tend to be funded wholly or partly by the United States, British and European Union sources, in combination with state-support from the United Kingdom's Film Council in Northern Ireland, Bord na Scannan na Eireann/Irish Film Board and the Arts Council in the Republic. Commentators on the economics and infrastructures for film making have long noted that there has *never* been a bona fide industry within Ireland, merely various kinds of film making activity, subject to the vicissitudes of other countries' economies, tax laws and labour markets. Because of its relatively small population on a physically bounded land mass, "Irish cinema" is dependent on sales of its films at cinemas, on TV and DVD sales beyond its own shores to maintain itself. Interestingly, since 2005 the Republic has been pioneering digital formats in a network of cinemas altering the nature and costing of selected film releases.

It is true that since its inauguration in the early 1980s, the Irish state has financially backed film support structures and offered tax incentives to foreign productions, but these have often been suspended (1988-93), subject to government change or threatened as the case with Section 481 in 2004. In the 1990s Ireland could compete effectively for film business, but more recently its costs and facilities have come into competition from east European economies providing cheaper locations, facilities and post-

production. The last decade has seen the continued influence on moving image production for cinema and terrestrial TV screening from British television (notably in Northern Ireland) where TV films and series often made in cross-border production with a now developed independent sector in the Republic. The onset of the Peace Process (1998) and decrease in political violence in Northern Ireland has not only changed the themes treated in films post-Ceasefire, but contributed to the transformation in the nature of the media and cultural sectors in Northern Ireland and the border areas of the Republic. The period under review has seen passing of the high point of the so-called Celtic Tiger economy (reckoned to be 2003) and positive spill-over effects for Northern Ireland of a stable economy in the United Kingdom under a Labour government.

Part of this material film culture is an infrastructure that exhibits and discusses the films, TV programmes and performances in a circuit film festivals and awards ceremonies from Cork to Clones and beyond; at film centres in Dublin, Derry and Belfast; in journals like *Film Ireland* and online reference sites like those hosted by Trinity College, Dublin and *Estudios Irlandases* based in Barcelona. Irish cinema has been subject to canonisation and critique at academic conferences organised by major universities who run degree programmes in film that all feature Irish cinema modules and, gradually, the number of doctorates on Irish film from its universities is notable. Quick to latch on to trends, both popular and academic publishing has produced several book series and individual titles the market for which was not apparent in the mid-1990s.

If the artistic impetus of *The Butcher Boy* was a debunking of national myths, films since then present an uneven range of topics and approaches, determined by the funding, technological and critical contexts just summarised. British director Ken Loach's *The Wind That Shakes the Barley* (2006) was a notable film that explored the Irish war of independence and civil war period (1919-23). It achieved significant box-office combining digital and conventional print release, was a critical success in Cannes and sold well in non-Anglophone European Union countries. In the period of the Peace Process, contentious contemporary history has featured in two contrasting films about the killing of thirteen civilians at a peace march in Derry by British soldiers in 1972 known as "Bloody Sunday" (Paul Greengrass' *Bloody Sunday* and Jimmy McGovern's TV film *Sunday*, both 2002) and more recently McQueen's *Hunger* (2008) has reawakened interest in the prison Hunger Strikes of the early 1980s. So while these historical and political topics stand out, they do because much of the rest of the material to view has tended to be less confrontational in its topics and techniques, seeking a popular audience market, a good example of this being Paddy Breathnach's teen horror *Shroons* (2007) which unashamedly delivers a "genre" film. Veteran director John Boorman's *The Tiger's Tale* (2006) is an example of a film that overtly comments on the post-Tiger zeitgeist but ends up a laboured, unsatisfying film. Indeed other gentler, less overtly "political" films can be seen to be teasing out and exploring other social and cultural phenomenon more effectively. These include such topics as Ireland's experience

of net immigration but also the malignant legacy of emigration from a previous generation as in the darkly tragic *Kings*, set in London (2007). Comic and upbeat treatments of new social interactions within Ireland include the short *My Name is Yu Ming* (2003) and the Oscar-winning musical film, *Once* (2006) which told the bitter-sweet romance between a Dublin busker and a Czech migrant. Ireland's increased wealth, materialism and social division, and the changing nature of sexual politics of a "post-Catholic Ireland" remain firmly in the frame of filmmakers' concerns. Gerry Stembridge's *About Adam* (2001) and Liz Gill's feature *Goldfish Memory* (2004) were notable examples that explored non-angst ridden narratives about fluid sexualities, drawing on European precedents, in a markedly middle-class milieu photographed with a lush visual quality. In a similar vein, Lenny Abrahamson, has emerged as a director of great talent, often working with script writer cum actor Mark O'Halloran to produce two very distinctive films: *Adam and Paul* (2004) and *Garage* (2007). The focus of his films is on the marginalised, the loner or alienated figure in Irish society. Whilst their debut feature featured two heroine addicts in Dublin and the follow up movie is set in a small-town locale, this is less a social realism than an acutely observed, sparsely scripted and stylised visualisation of contemporary Ireland which draws on a slowly paced, European aesthetic. Martin MacDonagh's latest film (following on from his highly acclaimed short, *Six Shooter* (2005) is set in European and can be read simply as a variation on a gangster/caper-movie. However, the dark humour, violence and the underlying themes of guilt/redemption are wonderfully played by Brendan Gleeson and Colin Farrell. Whilst theatrical modes, British TV and the experience of performance in the United States, funded big pictures and continue to feature in the definition of Irish film, European and European markets, European Union funding and a European cinema aesthetic have all increasingly featured in the past decade's most significant films.

Useful online sources

<http://www.estudiosirlandeses.org/indexnavy.htm>

<http://www.tcd.ie/irishfilm/>



Adam Paul Film. *Still*.



Colm Meany. *Kings*.